

ABSTRACT

QWSYHB / B'LYTN / QWSNTN / NTNMRN / NTNY /  
QWSWHB / NTNB'L:  
ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PERSONAL NAMES FROM IDUMEA  
FOR OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE LINGUISTIC REALITY IN  
PERSIAN PALESTINE

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Until about three decades ago, the historical evidence from the southern administrative unit in the land of Israel, 'Idumea', was relatively limited. The discovery of about 2,000 ostraca from this administrative unit in the late twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century has significantly altered our historical understanding of daily life in this area during the Persian period (538–332 BCE). The first-hand evidence of these ostraca has taught us for example about the movement of goods, the status of employees, and issues of land ownership. Moreover, as these administrative texts document both private and social life as they are reflected in verbal usage, they allow us to glimpse the complex linguistic strata in this geographical expanse and historical period. For example, these texts contain a variety of proper names belonging to people who lived in Idumea during the Persian period, indicating a multinational and multilingual situation that stands in a sharp contrast to the administrative language employed throughout the ostraca in which these names are mentioned, namely official Aramaic. The paper conducts a linguistic inquiry into the different languages that are threaded together by these proper names as evidence of the melting pot of spoken tongues in this area. We further integrate these findings with historical evidence from the Bible, allowing us to re-interpret Nehemiah's famous words (Neh 13:24) in a theoretical and historical framework with implications for our understanding of the forces that shaped Late Biblical Hebrew.